

Chol Hamoed Passover: Living in the Valley of the Dry Bones

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Chol hamoed is a liminal time. It is neither a full holiday nor a regular day, but rather a time in between, in which some elements of sacred days apply and some elements of mundane days apply. It resembles, in this way, other liminal Jewish times, such as *bein hashmashot* (twilight), the time of transition between day and night; *erusin*, part of the marriage process in which a couple commits to one another but has not yet gotten married; and the period of *aninut*, the intense time between death and burial, that typically lasts between a few hours and several days.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, found in Ezekiel 37:1-14, is fittingly read on Shabbat *chol hamoed* Passover. In the text, the prophet Ezekiel finds himself in a valley strewn with bones. A valley, situated between mountains, represents a liminal space, and Ezekiel stands in the valley during a liminal time, between exile and return.

As Ezekiel meanders through the valley, he notices that the bones are extremely dry and parched. God asks him if he believes that these bones can live. Instead of stating the obvious, that in any ordinary situation such dry bones can certainly not live, Ezekiel answers God's seemingly rhetorical question with hopeful optimism: "My Lord, God, you would know!" (Ezekiel 37:3).

God asks Ezekiel to "prophesy over these bones!" (Ezekiel 37:4). Ezekiel announces that God will breathe new life into them. Alas, God fashions these bones with muscles and ligaments; God adds flesh and skin. But they are still not imbued with the breath of life.

Ezekiel seems disappointed that the bones have not come back to life, but God instructs him further: "Prophesy to the wind!" (Ezekiel 37:9). Ezekiel must call to the four winds and ask them to breathe new life into the slain bones, so that they may come back to life. Upon Ezekiel's prophecy, the bones are indeed imbued with life and they rise upon their feet.

In Ezekiel's prophecy, the bones stand as a metaphor for the house of Israel, which finds itself lacking in hope, unable to think toward the future. God wishes to assure them that there is a better future ahead: that their bones will be moistened, their flesh reattached, breath blown into

their bodies and souls. They, too, will have the strength to stand back up on their feet. They will be able to walk again, and they will go on new journeys. Ezekiel, writing in the post-destruction era, assures his people that they will return home and rebuild. In other words, Ezekiel prophesies that exile and destruction are not permanent states: they are liminal times and places, bookended by happier, more stable circumstances.

Some later interpretations of this vision also associate it with the resurrection of the dead, either during Ezekiel's time or in the messianic future. Death, in this case, is itself recast as a time of in-between, not the end of the story.

Ezekiel's prophecy, read in the middle days of Passover, speaks as well to the experience of the Israelites in the process of leaving Egypt. In the flow of the holiday, this text is read after the initial exodus from Egypt (which is reenacted in the Seder) and before the seventh day of the holiday (the day on which the sea splits and the Israelites are fully out of the orbit of the Egyptians). This period, too, represents a liminal time and place: it was a time that called for new breath to enliven their spirits, to help them stand on their feet when they had little strength, to give them purpose and direction, and to help them walk through the split sea towards a better future. The journey out of the devastation, the text teaches us, is long, but it is not the end—it is the hard time in-between.

As we live through a period of horrific war and devastation, we might find a rare bit of comfort and hope in this prophecy. I pray that this is but a liminal moment that will soon pass and that, on the other side and before long, we will find or, more precisely, actively enact rebirth, renewal, and peace.

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